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ABSTRACT

The relationship between attitude change, recall of previous attitudes and dissonance between these two perceptions was investigated using 72 female undergraduates randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups. The first group, posttest first, completed a posttest after participation in a group discussion on construction of nuclear power plants, followed by a recall questionnaire of their earlier-held attitudes. The second group, recall first, took the posttest after completing the recall questionnaire. The third group was designated as the no-discussion control group. Evidence for "posttest sensitization" was obtained through an indirect measure of attitude change. Subjects who completed the posttest following a social influence attempt showed more distortion in recall of their pretest attitudes in the direction of their new attitudes than subjects who did not complete a posttest. Findings replicate the 1973 study by Goethals and Reckman and show that the effect is reduced when the posttest does not intervene between the discussion and the recall questionnaire. Although posttests may account for a large percentage of the change obtained in attitude change studies, results (of the present study) can not be generalizable to an unposttested population. (Author/CKJ)

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"How Do I Know What My Attitude Is Until After I've Told You?"[1]

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Previous studies (e.g., Bem & McConnell, 1970; Goethals & Reckman, 1973) have demonstrated that when subjects change their attitudes, they recall their previous attitudes as having been more consistent with their present position than they actually were. Goethals and Reckman administered a pretest which included a measure of attitudes toward busing. Within two weeks, subjects participated in a discussion in which a confederate argued against their original position. A posttest showed that the confederate was effective in changing their attitudes. Immediately after the posttest, subjects were asked to recall their pretest attitudes. The result was sizable errors of recall (relative to a no discussion control group), with subjects remembering their premanipulation attitudes as similar to their present attitudes. The authors interpret this as an attempt by subjects to reduce dissonance by denying the inconsistency between their new and previous attitudes. However, postexperimental interviews suggested that subjects were unaware of having changed their attitudes, an observation more compatible with self-perception theory.

From a self-perception perspective, two behaviors occurred between the pretest and the recall task which subjects might have used to "update" their attitudes: The discussion, in which they might have argued for their new position, and the posttest, on which they stated their new attitude. We suspected that stating one's attitude is a highly salient event, one which is likely to be remembered and used as a basis for inferring one's attitude on subsequent occasions. If the posttest were eliminated, one might expect subject's recall of their pretest attitudes to improve.

The present study contained three conditions: posttest first, a replication of Goethals and Reckman; recall first, in which the postest was delayed until after the recall questionnaire; and a

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no discussion control group. We hypothesized that subjects' recall errors in the direction of their new attitudes would be greater in the posttest first condition than in either the recall first or control conditions.

Method

Subjects

A 30-item pretest was administered to 277 female general psychology students at an eastern state university. Included was the item: "Further construction of nuclear power plants should be stopped," followed by a 31-point scale. Seventy-two subjects who disagreed with the statement were randomly assigned to the three conditions (n = 24).

Procedure

Eight to fifteen days later, subjects were run in groups of four containing one female confederate. Subjects were asked to discuss an issue "randomly chosen" from the pretest (nuclear power). The confederate took the anti-nuclear position, presenting six prerehearsed arguments against further construction, e.g., a plant could accidently explode killing thousands of people.

In the posttest first condition, immediately following the discussion subjects indicated their present attitude toward nuclear power on a 4-point scale. They were then asked to recall their responses to eight pretest items, including the nuclear power item. The experimenter urged subjects to be accurate since she would be checking their accuracy and errors would indicate that her survey was worthless. In the recall first condition, the order of presentation of the posttest and recall questionnaire was reversed. The confederate was blind to condition until after the discussion. Control subjects merely filled out the recall questionnaire.

Results

The actual and recalled pretest scores are presented in Table 1. A 2 x 3 mixed analysis of variance showed that subjects' recalled themselves as more opposed to nuclear power than they actually were. F (1.69) = 56.37, $p < .001$, and that pretest and recall scores interacted with conditions, F (2.69) = 7.75, $p < .01$. To test the hypotheses, each subject was given an error score equal to her

recalled score minus her actual score. As predicted, subjects in the posttest first condition made greater errors than subjects in the recall first condition, t (23) = 2.37, $p < .05$, and the control condition, t (23) = 3.96, $p < .001$. The recall first and control conditions did not differ. Further analyses confirmed that these differences occurred only on the nuclear power item and not on the other seven.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 2 shows the pretest and the posttest attitudinal responses. A 2 x 2 mixed analysis of variance showed that there was attitude change in the desired direction, F (1,46) = 87.56, $p < .001$, and that pretest and posttest responses interacted with conditions, F (1,46) = 7.69, $p < .01$. Analysis of change scores indicated that the posttest first subjects changed their attitudes more than the recall first subjects, t (23) = 2.77, $p < .01$.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

The present study replicated Goethals and Reckman (1973) using a different issue, confederate, and subject population. It also showed that the effect was reduced when the posttest did not intervene between the discussion and the recall questionnaire. From a dissonance perspective, it could be argued that the posttest first subjects were more committed to their changed attitudes, thereby showing greater distortion of their pretest attitudes to maintain consistency. A self-perception interpretation might be that the act of telling someone one's attitude is a salient cue that we use when inferring what our attitude must be. In fact, we might have no attitude at all toward some issues until we are asked about them.

Attitude change was also inhibited in the recall first condition. A dissonance interpretation is that having subjects re-

call their pretest attitude causes them to take a final position more consistent with it. A self-perception theorist might argue that having subjects reexpose themselves to their premanipulation attitude gives it greater salience in the final determination of their attitude.

The present results have methodological implications for the many attitude change studies in which a social influence attempt is immediately followed by a posttest. "Posttest sensitization" is at least as serious a testing artifact as the more familiar pretest sensitization (Lana, 1969). A posttest can (a) make the experiment more reactive, or (b) become a source of genuine attitude change by causing subjects to reflect on the meaning of the communication, something they might not otherwise have done. Measuring posttest sensitization is difficult, however, since one must devise an appropriate dependent measure in the "no posttest" condition. An indirect measure of attitude is required. If recall error is a valid indirect measure, the present results imply that posttests account for a large percentage of the change that is obtained in attitude change studies. If so, the results are not generalizable to an unposttested population.

Footnote

[1]This paper has been submitted for presentation at the annual convention of the Eastern Psychological Association in April 1979. The authors would like to thank Lisa Helsel for her skillful performance as the confederate.

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Table 1

Mean Pretest and Recall of Pretest Scores

Condition	Pretest	Recall of Pretest
Posttest first	7.71	15.21
Recall first	8.00	11.83
Control	8.13	10.04

Note. Attitude toward nuclear power plants was measured on a 31-point scale with 1 being the pro-nuclear position and 31 being the anti-nuclear position.

Table 2

Mean Pretest and Posttest Attitudes

Condition	Pretest	Posttest
Posttest first	1.54	3.00
Recall first	1.58	2.38

Note. For this analysis, pretest attitudes were converted to the same 4-point scale that was used on the posttest, with 1 being the pro-nuclear position and 4 being the anti-nuclear position.